

## Introduction

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Activities aiming at peacebuilding and conflict transformation need sound analysis, clarity of purpose, flexible strategising, and also long-term commitment and a robust frustration tolerance in the face of adversity and set-backs. Readiness for self-reflection and a critical assessment of strategies are therefore imperative for organisations active in the field. The past 15 years have seen numerous comprehensive efforts to assess what difference peacebuilding can make. For many peace organisations, getting a clear idea of their own outreach, potential and limits, success and failure is crucial. This is not only due to donor agencies' increasing requests for evaluation, but also important for building the identities of teams and individuals active in these organisations. But identifying criteria for success or failure remains a highly complicated and demanding endeavour.

In March 2008, an open letter provocatively titled *Just Wasting our Time?* created quite a stir in the field of peacebuilding.<sup>1</sup> The authors – Simon Fisher (founder of the UK-based organisation Responding to Conflict) and Lada Zimina (currently conflict advisor at Care International UK; but writing in a private capacity) – are activists, trainers and analysts with long-term international experience. They argue that despite the progress made and the achievements to be proud of, many peacebuilding activities are missing the mark and that peacebuilders might be partially responsible for their own failure. They acknowledge that advances have been made, in particular by improving the conceptual and methodological basis and mobilizing a host of actors from the grassroots to the governmental levels. At the same time the authors state that, overall, “the peacebuilding message seems to be too muted, weak and fragmented”, while “globalised corporate power exerts ever more undemocratic control over the essential

<sup>1</sup> See <http://lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com>.

components of peace” (in this volume, 12). Fisher and Zimina identify several major obstacles on the road to ‘big picture change’ (or ‘peace writ large’) and diagnose a deep gap between the rhetoric and reality of fundamental change. They portray a dichotomy between ‘technical peacebuilding’, implemented by a so-called peace industry, and ‘transformative peacebuilding’, carried by a social movement. According to their experience, many actors focus on technical peacebuilding activities rather than transformative ones, neglecting crucial values such as ‘social justice’. Some are even developing submissive attitudes to agencies in power and have lost independence due to financial dependency on governmental (or commercially-orientated) donors. Moreover, the authors claim that fragmented relationships within civil society and competition over resources hamper effective networking, cooperation and learning processes. Fisher and Zimina launch a call for a new agenda for peacebuilding, which in their view needs to be accountable to local partners and respond to issues such as economic justice, environmental responsibility and human rights.

Seeing how vivid the initial reactions to the open letter were, we decided to publish an edited version of this text in the Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series and to organise a debate around these ideas and open questions, collecting a set of comments from colleagues and experts from academia, policy advocacy and peacebuilding practice. We asked them to compare and contrast Fisher and Zimina’s findings and recommendations with their own experience and research.

Most respondents agree that there is a painful gap between rhetoric and action in peacebuilding. They also acknowledge a tension between activities adhering to the status quo and approaches calling for deep transformation. The contrasting portrayal of ‘technical peacebuilding’ and ‘transformative peacebuilding’ proved to be appealing, especially for practitioners. On the other hand, the respondents also called for more terminological clarity and differentiation, for putting planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation into concrete context and for accepting a division of labour and roles between different peacebuilding actors.

**Louis Kriesberg**, professor emeritus of Syracuse University, USA and veteran analyst of processes of social change and conflict resolution, traces the development of a social movement of peace and conflict resolution (PCR movement) that spread from the US since the 1980s. He also proposes that non-governmental actors should refine their understanding of government actors and recognize that governments may vary greatly. While there are actors who should be eschewed or confronted, it is important to remain open to those who are interested in change. For this purpose, Kriesberg calls upon members of the PCR movement to “consider the ways that relevant research findings, experiences and insights can be effectively communicated to political figures” (in this volume, 41). He also encourages a more energetic and consciously developed division of labour between diverse groups engaged in the peacebuilding field as “they vary in the work they can do at different stages of a conflict and they differ in the skills and the resources they can bring to transforming a conflict, a society or the world” (ibid., 42). With regard to funding and its associated dilemmas (e.g. fundraising that becomes the core of the work, dependency issues), Kriesberg suggests that NGOs should cooperate, partner and network more systematically. Greater interaction and an exchange of ideas should be cultivated, which can happen in some long-established networks as well as new formats. Such interaction and exchange should also examine the vision and values of actors. Academia, finally, should investigate the underlying conditions and causes of conflict including research on the development and effects of the military-industrial-political-media complex in eminent countries such as the US, Russia and China.

**Diana Chigas and Peter Woodrow**, co-directors of the Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) project run by CDA – Collaborative Learning Projects in Cambridge, USA, check the lead article’s findings against the insights gathered by the RPP-project. They share the opinion that peacebuilding efforts are indeed not ‘adding up’, yet suggest that Fisher and Zimina’s critical assessment and recommendations do not go far enough. They remind us that what is still missing in many cases are adequate conflict analyses. Currently, these “too often aim to be *too comprehensive* and produce *long lists* of factors, in fairly general terms” (Chigas/Woodrow in this volume, 48). There is a lack of contextualised and dynamic understanding which prioritises the most important factors and reflects on possible intended and unintended consequences of a given intervention at a given time (and over time). The comment supports Fisher and Zimina’s call to re-think current practice in terms of socially just empowerment, accountability structures and responsiveness to local needs. But Chigas and Woodrow advocate a division of labour in which both technical and transformative peacebuilding have their roles to play. They suggest using theories of change as a reflection tool that peacebuilding needs in order to ‘add up’. They propose rethinking the nature of peace “in order to test, and challenge where appropriate, the liberal democratic paradigm that comprises the default conception” (ibid., 50). At the same time they are not convinced that a broad and general discussion of peace writ large would improve the transformative quality of peacebuilding practice as “a general rethinking risks producing a generic definition of peace assumed to be applicable in all places” (ibid.). Moreover, they caution against oversimplification, such as assuming that there is *the* community, who determines the agenda, and that certain actors are suspicious *per se* (i.e. governments and corporations).

**Martina Weitsch**, representative of the Quaker Council for European Affairs with a great deal of experience in lobbying for peacebuilding at the European Union (EU) level, too, points out that there might be certain value in ‘technical’ peacebuilding approaches as these can serve as a gate-opener to decision-makers. She raises the objection that Fisher and Zimina pay scant attention to the EU as an actor with peacebuilding potential, which non-governmental initiatives need to relate to. She presents experiences from the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), an NGO-platform based in Brussels. She lists a number of achievements, among them an institutionalised dialogue between NGOs and the EU’s Council Secretariat and successful discussions with the European Investment Bank on conflict sensitivity in their lending practices. Weitsch criticises how the term ‘peacebuilding community’ employed by Fisher and Zimina ignores that many different communities exist. She suggests getting rid of stereotypes and ‘enemy images’ with respect to state actors and the business community, and looking for alliance partners for peacebuilding within administrations and companies. At the same time, she acknowledges difficulties in connecting NGOs’ voices to the decision-making process at higher political levels. In order to better mobilize political decision-makers and representatives of the corporate sector it is imperative “to get public opinion galvanised” and forge alliances with the media (Weitsch in this volume, 65). Thus she reinforces a point also made by Kriesberg, who expresses a need to make peacebuilding activities more visible, plausible and attractive to the public at large (in this volume, 43).

**Goran Bozicevic**, a peace practitioner and teacher from Croatia (most recently founder of the Miramida Center in Grzoznjan/Istria), picks up the question of the underlying concept of ‘peace’ that peacebuilders are working for. In his view, the tension between ‘technical’ and ‘transformative’ peacebuilding becomes most tangible in working with donor organisations that are driven by bureaucratic and short-term outcome orientated mindsets. He confesses that such approaches cause him the greatest frustration and turn out to be counterproductive, as they suffocate processes of change that are driven by local stakeholders. Bozicevic adds experiences from his work as peacebuilding trainer in a UN-funded project and as director of the Volunteer Project Pakrac in Croatia in the 1990s, which illustrate the consequences of incompatibilities concerning flexibility in planning, values of cooperation and funding. In his view, transformative peacebuilding needs to create change that addresses the roots of conflict. Moreover, he questions the concept of there being *one* sole community of peacebuilders. The example of several war veterans’ active involvement in processes of conflict transformation in the region of former Yugoslavia shows that peacebuilding is done by many individuals and groups – even though many of them do not call it ‘peacebuilding’. But, as Bozicevic underlines, they do contribute to transforming social relations, shifting power distribution, widening the space for dealing with the past, promoting truth and tolerance and challenging authorities.

The comment by **Ulrike Hopp and Barbara Unger** (Berghof Peace Support, Berlin), focuses in more detail on the issue of learning in conflict. It welcomes the lead article’s initial and excitingly provocative stimulus. Accepting Fisher and Zimina’s overall critical assessment, Hopp and Unger suggest that we reflect in more depth on the questions “*where* does change need to happen, and *how well* are we – and our organisations – *equipped* to inspire that change?” (Hopp/Unger in this volume, 79). They point to some of the extensive literature on organisational learning and development, which also offers food for reflection for peacebuilding organisations. In order to learn well in conflict settings, organisations need to address conflict-replicating tensions within teams and organisations. They have to create regular strategic learning opportunities, and, at the same time, enable team members’ ‘spontaneous’ learning. And they should design project proposals that allow for adjustment and flexibility in cooperation with donors. Finally, the authors suggest building learning teams that are made up by committed individuals who can take the critical self-reflection of strategies and purposes further. A prerequisite for this is an organisational culture where reflection and learning – not just doing or producing – are regarded as an integral, valued part of the work.

**Martina Fischer**, deputy director at the Berghof Research Center and vice president of the German Foundation for Peace Research, suggests that the picture of global conflict trends is not as bleak as Fisher and Zimina assume. She argues that some substantial progress has been made which should be fully acknowledged. In determining whether the glass is therefore half full or half empty, she asserts that going for the optimistic version makes it easier to proceed on the long road for peace by constantly improving mechanisms of conflict prevention and transformation on the level of international organisations, state and civil society. Fischer points out that many peacebuilding agencies, in particular civil society organisations, have developed a high degree of critical self-reflection and started discussions on appropriate evaluation tools. However, these debates have also contributed to problematic and often exaggerated expectations with respect to the impacts that can be achieved. Moreover, the debate has raised unrealistic expectations regarding evaluation. Evaluation mechanisms have often come to be misunderstood as a documentation of quantitatively measurable,

short-term results. Fischer is convinced that in order to support transformative peacebuilding, much more participatory evaluation and action research is needed. The different concepts of peace, conflict transformation, reconciliation, justice and security that guide peacebuilding efforts need to be discussed more explicitly. Fischer states that it is also crucial to critically reflect on and question the hypotheses of impact that guide peacebuilding projects. Finally, in order to support transformative peacebuilding, peace research needs to go back to the roots and replace analysis that is merely policy-orientated (and targeted at increasing the effectiveness of peace operations) with normative and critical analysis that looks at the context.

This Dialogue seeks to heighten the awareness that we need to look at successes and failures in a sounder way. The lead article and the comments offer food for further thought rather than final answers. The caveat that we take away from the Dialogue, though, is that contextualisation is indispensable, and learning must be ongoing and better rooted within the daily practice of individuals and organisations. We believe there will be no other way to improve our practice than to continue to discuss visions, motivations, values, potential and limitations and to do what we are trying to do in a well-reflected manner – in each case, over and over again.

We wish to thank all the authors who have contributed to this Berghof Handbook Dialogue. We hope it will serve as an incentive for a wider debate, whether through the Berghof Handbook website ([www.berghof-handbook.net](http://www.berghof-handbook.net); [info@berghof-handbook.net](mailto:info@berghof-handbook.net)), the open letter forum (<http://lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com>) or via ad hoc groups and direct communication including the authors (authors' contact information can be found at the back of this volume).

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### See also...

This article has been published as part of Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 7, *Peacebuilding at a Crossroads? Dilemmas and Paths for Another Generation* (2009). Hardcopies of the complete version, including the following articles, can be ordered at the Berghof Research Center (order@berghof-center.org):

- Martina Fischer and Beatrix Schmelzle, *Introduction*
- Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina, *Just Wasting Our Time? Provocative Thoughts for Peacebuilders*
- Louis Kriesberg, *Making Good Use of the Time: Contributions and Dilemmas of Non-governmental Actors in Peacebuilding*
- Diana Chigas and Peter Woodrow, *Envisioning and Pursuing Peace Writ Large*
- Martina Weitsch, *Mobilizing Public Opinion for Peace: The Next Challenge for the Peacebuilding Communities*
- Goran Bozicevic, *Reflections on Peacebuilding from Croatia*
- Ulrike Hopp and Barbara Unger, *Time to Learn: Expanding Organisational Capacities in Conflict Settings*
- Martina Fischer, *Participatory Evaluation and Critical Peace Research: A Precondition for Peacebuilding*
- Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina, *Reflections on the Comments: Responses and More Queries.*

Downloads of all articles are available free of charge on our website ([www.berghof-handbook.net](http://www.berghof-handbook.net)).

*Please note:* An online forum for further discussion has been established by Lada Zimina and Simon Fisher at [www.lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com](http://www.lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com).